

A STUDY TO EXAMINE OUTSOURCING FIRE PREVENTION BUREAU  
SERVICES

EXECUTIVE PLANNING

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## **ABSTRACT**

The problem was the Mount Prospect Fire Department had not examined outsourcing fire prevention bureau services. The purpose of this applied research project was to examine outsourcing fire prevention bureau services.

Descriptive research was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What fire service changes are taking place that are influencing the use of contractual services or outsourcing?
2. Do similar suburban fire departments in the Chicago area use outsourcing for fire prevention bureau services?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using contractual services or outsourcing?

The research was accomplished through a literature review, telephone interviews with owners of companies specializing in outsourcing fire prevention bureau services, and surveys of similar suburban fire departments in the Chicago area.

Literature searches were initiated at the National Emergency Training Center's (NETC) Learning Resource Center, the public library system of the City of Naperville, Illinois and the library of Illinois Benedictine University located in Lisle, Illinois. Extensive searches were also conducted online through Internet search engines to identify current documentation of the research topic.

The results of the research indicated that during tight budgets and demands for quality services at a low price, outsourcing becomes a viable option.

The research revealed similar suburban fire departments in the Chicago area outsource fire prevention bureau services.

The research indicated the advantages of outsourcing include cost reduction; ease of workloads and the ability to use specially trained personnel. The disadvantages of outsourcing include loss of control, excessive plan review times, and potential for collusion.

The researcher recommended outsourcing construction document review and inspections during peak work demands, and not as a means to replace staff. The recommendations included the development of a means to defer the cost of the outsourcing, development of outsourcing selection criteria, and oversight of the outsourcing.

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>TABLE OF CONTENTS.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>LIST OF TABLES</b>	
<b>Table1 (Fire Departments Utilization of Outsourcing).....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Table 2 (Fire Prevention Bureau Services Outsourced).....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Table 3 (Importance of Outsourcing Selection Criteria).....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>PROCEDURES.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>RESULTS.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>DISCUSSION.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>APPENDIX A (Telephone Interview Questionnaire).....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>APPENDIX B (Survey Questionnaire).....</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>APPENDIX C (Survey Cover Letter) .....</b>	<b>41</b>

## INTRODUCTION

The problem is the Mount Prospect Fire Department has not examined outsourcing fire prevention bureau services. The purpose of this applied research project is to examine outsourcing fire prevention bureau services.

Pressures are increasing on government officials to reduce the cost of services as well as to calculate how best to offer services or to determine whether to offer some services at all.

Managing in today's government is a never-ending challenge due to cutback environment experienced nationwide (Clark, 1998, p. 18).

"The contracting out of traditional government services is a popular form of privatization that is growing at a remarkable pace in cities and counties throughout the United States" (Moore, 1999, p. 190). "Few government services have remained untouched by privatization" (Clark, 1998, p. 18) "

Cost is not the only reason for seeking privatization. "More and more public agencies and municipalities that have had to cope with substantial staff reductions have found it both economical and efficient to use privatized employees" (Wigdahl, 1994, p. 11). "Local governments across the country are increasingly turning to the private sector as a strategy for increasing efficiency, quality, and effectiveness of government service delivery"(Martin, 1996, p. 2). Privatization is referred to as competition in government as a result of citizens and elected officials looking for efficient services (McGillicuddy, 1996).

"Rather than employing some form of load shedding, most governments have preferred contracting as the method to shift operations to the private sector" (Seidenstat, 1999, p. 7). In this scenario the government entity retains ownership and overall control. This is a common practice that is now taking place in a number of municipalities and Mount Prospect is no

different.

The Village of Mount Prospect recently implemented a means to reduce costs, and increase the quality of service in the Building Division by contracting or outsourcing construction document reviews. The fire department's construction document reviews are not outsourced but performed by fire department personnel.

There is currently a privately owned company providing fire suppression and fire prevention services in an unincorporated area in Mount Prospect Illinois. The Mount Prospect Fire Department once provided fire suppression and fire prevention services in this area.

Descriptive research is used to answer the following research questions:

1. What fire service changes are taking place that are influencing the use of contractual services or outsourcing?
2. Do similar suburban fire departments in the Chicago area use outsourcing for fire prevention bureau services?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using contractual services or outsourcing?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The problem was instigated when tax revenues for the Village of Mount Prospect declined and departments within the Village began to consider outsourcing their services.

The Village of Mount Prospect has a budget deficit of 1 million dollars in 2002 and a projected budget shortfall of 1.8 million dollars in 2003. The decline in tax revenue is attributed to the national economy as a whole, as well as the closing of a number of large retail stores in the shopping center located in the Village of Mount Prospect (Village of Mount Prospect, 2001).

The decline in the economy impacts further economic development, which affects the demands for construction permits and inspections. During this period, the Mount Prospect

Building Division was faced with a vacant construction document reviewer position. The building division elected to outsource or privatize the construction document review service with cost effective specially trained personnel. The contracting of services is a popular form of privatization that is growing (Moore, 1999).

Privatization as a strategy to improve economical performance is being practiced throughout the world, with roots dating through the twentieth century (Clark, 1998, p. 18). “Privatization, the shifting of services to the public sector is not new or radical. In a fiscally constrained environment, this concept is an effective budget tool” (Guardino, Haarmeyer, & Poole, 1993).

An adjoining unincorporated area within Mount Prospect was once protected by the emergency services offered by the Mount Prospect Fire Department. In 1979, an annexation dispute combined with the cost of services, made it advantageous for the adjoining community to award a contract for emergency and fire prevention services to a privately owned company (Guardino et al. 1993). The private fire department still provides service to this geographical area.

Contracting of government services is not just isolated to the Mount Prospect suburb of Chicago. In the city of Chicago, Mayor Daley is championing the city’s aggressive program of contracting out services (Guardino et al. 1993, p. 3). During his term in office Mayor Daley has privatized janitorial services, parking garages at O’Hare Airport, check cashing, golf course management, tree stump removal, car removal, fleet maintenance and many more services (Mahtesian, 1994, p. 26).

The present impact of the problem is that when a position becomes vacant in the fire prevention bureau, it is likely that the fire department will need to be fiscally responsible in

determining how that position is filled or if it is filled. The utilization of contract personnel to perform fire prevention bureau services is an option to be considered.

A current position that is often scrutinized by the Village Manager and has the greatest turnover is the fire protection engineer. The average retention of the fire protection engineer in the past five years has been two years (Mount Prospect Fire Department, 2001).

When fire prevention bureau positions such as the fire protection engineer becomes vacant, the Mount Prospect Fire Department needs to fill the position with an individual that will contribute to the overall effectiveness of the fire prevention bureau. Placing the proper individual in the fire prevention bureau is essential. “An untrained fire prevention staff is dangerous to both the public and to fire fighters as well as a waste of the city’s financial resources” (Bachtler & Brennan, 1995, p. 971).

“There are many activities in performing fire prevention to the high professional level required in today’s complicated environment” (Klinoff, 1997, p. 279). During the last decade or two, the position of fire inspector has quietly and significantly evolved. “In many places the inspector is now one of the most highly trained professionals in the fire service” (Scott, 1997, p. 84).

According to Bachtler and Brennan (1995) fire prevention activities will accelerate in the future and departments will be expected to do more with less necessitating creative approaches to fire prevention.

Ensuring the fire prevention bureau is staffed in a fiscally responsible manner with qualified individuals is critical to meeting the mission of the Mount Prospect Fire Department. If not addressed, the research problem will impact the future of the organizational effectiveness of the Mount Prospect Fire Department.

This applied research project is being conducted as a required component of the



Executive Planning Course offered by the National Fire Academy. The issue of outsourcing of fire prevention bureau services is directly related to the course. Outsourcing or privatization is a change that is taking place in the Village of Mount Prospect government. The Executive Planning Course prepares the student to begin to think strategically and look toward the future in order to respond to the changing environment. The research problem relates to the evaluation of outsourcing that may occur in the future as a result of a changing environment.

The research problem is linked to the United State Fire Administration's operational objectives of reducing the loss of fire in the age groups 14 years and younger as well as those individuals over the age of 65. This will be accomplished by ensuring the Mount Prospect Fire Prevention Bureau is capable of continuing quality fire prevention bureau activities in the future.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

A literature review was performed to examine outsourcing fire prevention bureau services. Literature searches were initiated at the National Emergency Training Center's (NETC) Learning Resource Center (LRC) in October 2001 during the author's attendance at the National Fire Academy. Additional searches were conducted within the public library system of the City of Naperville, Illinois and at Illinois Benedictine University located in Lisle Illinois. The literature review involved the search of fire service, public administration, and organizational behavior textbooks, magazines, professional journals, and reports. Extensive searches were also conducted online through Internet search engines to identify published documents. The author's private collection of fire service, organizational behavior, and public administration literature was also reviewed.

Clark (1998) identifies privatization as a strategy to improve economical performance. Clark explains that privatization offers a cure for municipalities facing tough economic times.

“Government officials must evaluate many different potential solutions in order to ensure that ends meet” (Clark, 1998, p. 18). According to Clark, government officials are faced to find the best possible service at the lowest cost. Clark indicates that in order for government agencies to survive privatization, they must become efficient, offer the best possible service and develop a competitive edge.

The work of Clark (1998) influenced the research by establishing how privatization can become an option for government officials in tough economic times. This finding is directly related to the research problem because at the time of research, the municipality where the research problem is occurring is facing tough economic times.

Wigdahl (1994) uses the loss of tax revenue and the need to reduce municipal staffing as reasons for privatization to occur. Wigdahl indicates that privatization is cost effective, increases productivity and flexibility within the government entity. He also describes the types of municipal jobs that can be privatized and that privatization is here to stay. The findings of Wigdahl (1994) influenced the research by identifying driving forces behind privatization.

“During his term in office Chicago Mayor Richard Daley has privatized janitorial services, parking garages at O’Hare Airport, check cashing, golf course management, tree stump removal, car removal, fleet maintenance and many more services” (Mahtesian, 1994, p. 26). Kent (1987) indicates that privatization refers to the transfer of functions previously performed exclusively by government, usually at zero or below full-cost prices. Kent further explains the evidence is overwhelming that privatization at the local level works. Kent states that even though fire protection is less extensively privatized, cost savings have been achieved with no decrease in service quality.

This information influenced the project by defining privatization and indicating that successful privatization has occurred. These findings forced the author to examine privatization further and the role it plays in the fire service.

Seidenstat (1999) defines contracting services as a form of privatization. According to Seidenstat, many government entities have elected to use the method of privatization known as contracting out services. Most government entities prefer this method of privatization because the government entity can still retain control of the service provided by the contractor.

These findings affected the research by identifying the practice of contracting out services as a form of privatization. The work of Seidenstat (1999) also established contracting out of a government service as a method for the government entity to retain control of the service.

The practice of competitive contracting and the associated cost savings demonstrates the viability of privatization as a tool to maintain services without increasing taxes (Guardino et al. 1993). They also state that in times of budget shortfalls, competitive contracting has been more accessible and made it an effective budget tool. At the time of research, the Village of Mount Prospect is experiencing a budget shortfall and has an even larger projected budget deficit in the upcoming fiscal year (Village of Mount Prospect, 2001).

Guardino et al. (1993), indicates a growing part of the nationwide privatization trend is the use of private companies to provide fire prevention and suppression services. Private-sector companies are involved in every aspect of fire prevention and suppression.

These findings impacted the research by identifying how competition in government has spilled over into the fire service because of budget shortfalls. This directly influenced the research because the research problem is instigated by budget shortfalls. These findings indicate that fire suppression and fire prevention services are being privatized throughout the country.

The work of Guardino et al. (1993), forced the author to research what factors or trends would influence privatization of fire prevention services.

Government officials may be reluctant to identify privatization opportunities because of the potential for the loss of jobs. However, government officials tend to support privatization just in principle (Atherton & Windsor, 1987).

In examining the evidence of privatization, there is a presumption that government bureaucracies are inferior to privately owned businesses (Atherton & Windsor, 1987). Atherton and Windsor indicate that one of the superior performances of private firms is the presence of the competition and the establishment of a management incentive structure, which encourages cost savings.

The findings of Atherton and Windsor impacted the research by identifying how privatization fosters competition. Their work also identified that privately owned companies are superior to government. These findings compelled the author to examine how competition plays a role in privatization as well as to research what is a driving force for government to seek privatization.

McGillicuddy (1996) refers to privatization as competition in government. He also determines that competition is one of the driving forces behind privatization. "Whether the private or the public sector is selected to provide the service, competition is identified as a means of improving performance and enhancing customer service satisfaction" (McGillicuddy, 1996, p. 8). The work of McGillicuddy influenced the research by identifying competition in government as a component of the factors influencing privatization.

According to Koehler and Pankowski (1996), a problem facing government today is a lack of competition. Customer satisfaction with government declines annually with a request by

government to increase funding to improve services. However, annual reports indicate just how successful government has been.

These findings impacted the research by further identifying the role of competition in government. The results of this finding forced the author to look further into the fact that the lack of competition in government can help drive the privatization of government services.

Klinoff (1997) indicates that one of the most important and least recognized jobs the fire department performs is that of fire prevention. Klinoff identifies that in today's complicated environment, the duties of fire prevention activities have evolved to a higher professional level. Scott (1997) indicates that in many places the fire inspector is one of the most highly trained fire service professionals. The Mount Prospect Fire Department has had significant turnover of personnel in the fire prevention bureau and had difficulty recruiting qualified individuals to fill the vacant positions (Mount Prospect Fire Department, 2001). These findings were significant to the research because it identified the importance of fire prevention staffing. This impacted the research because it established the need to ensure the fire prevention bureau is staffed with qualified personnel. These findings are also significant because to conduct an evaluation of outsourcing, one needs to consider if personnel qualifications are a key-determining factor.

Puchovsky, (1997) identified the need for specially trained personnel when he examined the use of performance-based codes and standards. Performance-based designs define the fire safety goals and desired level of fire safety. The methods to meet the fire safety goals are proven by a sequence of fire protection engineering methods and calculations conducted with computerized fire models (Puchovsky). He also states that the commonly used fire safety codes and standards enforced today, use prescriptive codes to prescribe a combination of specific requirements such as construction materials or protection systems. Puchovsky also indicates performance-based designs are gaining momentum on a global scale and are seen by many as

providing a number of advantages over the current prescriptive-based designs. This information influenced the research because it identified an increased trend in the use of performance-based designs and the need for specially trained fire prevention bureau personnel.

In performance-based designs, the designer has the opportunity to identify fire and life safety objectives and gain approval from the authority having jurisdiction in the preliminary phase of the project (Mirkhah, 1997). “This will require a paradigm shift for the authorities having jurisdiction, which means an attitude and philosophy change, toward the plans review and code enforcement process” (Mirkhah, 1997, p. 2). He also concluded a difficulty encountered by authorities having jurisdiction is the lack of technical expertise and engineering knowledge in reviewing performance-based designs. Mirkhah indicates many authorities having jurisdiction will fall short of the education needed for performance-based designs since the performance-based designs focus heavily on engineering solutions that utilize computer models that require extensive levels of engineering education and experience. He concludes that authorities having jurisdiction could enhance their technical difficulties in reviewing performance-based designs if they have a fire protection engineer on staff.

This information compelled the researcher to look further to see how fire prevention bureaus are technically prepared for performance-based codes. The information also indicated an advantage of having a fire protection engineer in a fire prevention bureau. This is relevant to the research problem because a fire protection engineer position exists in the Mount Prospect fire prevention bureau and is one of the positions that will be considered for outsourcing when it becomes vacant. The findings also indicated how the need for specially trained personnel has increased in the field of fire prevention. This information plays a significant role in the evaluation of the relevancy of outsourcing fire prevention services.

Wood (2000) conducted research to see if the Illinois Office of the State Fire Marshal is adequately prepared to conduct plan reviews and field inspections of projects that employ performance-based designs. Wood's research also included learning from the experiences of other state and municipal fire prevention agencies relative to reviewing and inspecting performance-based design projects.

Wood (2000) indicates the need to consider performance-based designs is eminent for the fire service. Wood (2000) concludes that the majority of the jurisdictions surveyed, including the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal are not prepared for performance-based codes and performance-based enforcement. He also concluded the fire service's employment of personnel trained in performance-based design is deficient. However, the nation's large cities appeared to be better prepared to handle performance-based designs. Wood reached his conclusions by surveying 92 % of the state fire agencies, 80 % of the nation's most populated cities and 93% of Illinois' most populated cities. Most of the agencies surveyed did not employ a single fire protection engineer. According to Wood's research, fire protection engineers were employed by 27.3% of the state fire marshals, 56.5% of the major cities, and 18.5% of the responding cities in Illinois. Wood recommended outsourcing as a method to handle the future demand of performance based codes.

Wood's (2000) findings were relevant to the author's research because it pertained to the Office of the State Fire Marshal in the same state as the research problem and because the surveys included populated cities within the same state as the research problem. The findings of Wood indicated a lack of municipal fire protection engineers, which is relevant to the research problem because one of the positions in the Mount Prospect Fire Prevention Bureau is a fire protection engineer. Lastly, one of the recommendations of Wood was to use outsourcing as a means to handle performance-based codes.

According to Bachtler and Brennan (1995), fire prevention bureau personnel in the future will need greater technical capabilities. Only continuous training will keep fire prevention bureau personnel proficient in technological advancement. Bachtler and Brennan also indicate changes in fire suppression have not kept with the pace of the field of fire protection.

In fire protection, advances have been made in a number of areas such as detection, codes, engineering, construction materials, building techniques and public safety education. It has become increasingly important for fire departments to stay current in all technological advancements, which contribute to fire safety (Bachtler & Brennan, 1995). According to Bachtler and Brennan, fire departments have begun to hire specially trained individuals for fire prevention such as fire protection engineers.

The findings of Bachtler and Brennan were significant to the research because it identified the complexity of fire prevention today. This influenced the research problem because the complexity of the fire protection profession now dictates what abilities the person must have if he or she is capable of filling vacant fire prevention positions. These findings were significant because like other findings noted above, it also identified the use of a technical person such as a fire protection engineer for municipal fire prevention. The increased need for a technical person in fire prevention is an item to consider in the evaluation of outsourcing fire prevention services.

Kleiman and Sahu (1999) discussed the implementation of privatization and illustrated, the advantages and disadvantages to contracting government services. Contracting services reduce cost of the services because government producers have no incentive to hold down production costs whereas private producers do. According to Kleiman and Sahu, one of the reasons for the lower contract cost is the competition to obtain the contract and the need to operate efficiently in a competitive environment. This process tends to bring government to the lowest cost. Kleiman and Sahu further explain that government agencies are less productive per



hour than private firms due to factors such as excessive staffing, generous vacation, holiday leave, and inferior management practices.

Kleiman and Sahu (1999) also explain the difficulties that may be encountered with contracting government services. The competitive bidding process for services may not always provide the lowest cost if there are few suppliers of the service. They also indicate there are concerns the specifications of the privatization contract may have difficulty in defining a measurable output such as “good service”. Other contract difficulty discussed by Kleiman and Sahu is the monitoring of the service quality provided by the private firm and enforcing the contract when difficulties arise.

The work of Kleiman and Sahu impacted the research project by identifying both advantages and disadvantages of using contract services in government. These findings forced the author to look further for advantages and disadvantages of contracting government services.

Moore (1999) discusses how contracting government services impacts the public employees by examining employment-related privatization issues. The first issue discussed by Moore is job displacement by privatization. Moore concluded by his studies that only 5 percent of the workers are actually displaced by privatization and government workers affected received very little public assistance. Moore indicates that privatization does not eliminate jobs but actually creates jobs. Private sector jobs are more capital intensive and can spill over into the local government. Moore indicates that the money saved by the government can be put back into the hands of the citizens, which will equate to more spending and jobs. According to Moore, many of the effected government employees are actually retained by the private company.

“When the local government fails to protect the job security and wages of public employees affected by privatization, community support for the initiative is often eroded” (Moore, 1999, p. 217). The work of Moore impacted the research by examining the effects of

privatization on the employees. This was significant because the effects of privatization on the employees are a critical element in the evaluation of using contract personnel to conduct fire prevention bureau services.

O'Leary (1997) also examines the pros and cons of utilizing contracts for government services. According to O'Leary government agencies pursue contracts for four primary reasons. Those reasons are to save money, promote flexibility, further social objectives and to garner political support. O'Leary explains that contracts provide a less expensive way of providing the service and enhance flexibility by providing a tailored program. According to O'Leary, contracting can be good politics by providing conservative politicians a means to curb big government and promote social objectives by awarding the contract to minority businesses. O'Leary also explained that the use of contracts also provides an opportunity for competition in government.

The disadvantages of contracting government services identified by O'Leary (1997) include the need for monitoring, potential for collusion and abuse, resistance by labor unions, and inappropriate providers. The findings of the work of O'Leary impacted the research project by identifying the pros and cons of contracting government services.

## **PROCEDURES**

### **Definition of Terms**

Fire Prevention Personnel-Individuals responsible for conducting fire prevention activities such as fire inspections, fire safety education, and construction document reviews.

Fire Protection Engineer-An individual with a degree in fire protection engineering.

Mutual Aide Box Alarm System (MABAS)-An organized fire department mutual aide system for the suburbs of Chicago.

Performance-Based Codes-Regulations that recognize compliance through performance-based design methods. Compliance is achieved by demonstrating performance criteria apposed to prescriptive specifications.

Privatization-To change from a government service, to a service provided by a privately owned entity.

### **Limitations**

An expected limitation of the research was that not all of the surveys were returned. Returned survey results were limited with the assumption that the person completing the survey was knowledgeable about the topic and answered the survey questions honestly.

### **Research Methodology**

The descriptive research method is used to examine the problem. This is accomplished through a literature review, telephone interviews with private companies specializing in outsourcing of fire prevention services and using survey instruments with similar suburban fire departments surrounding Mount Prospect, Illinois.

The research problem was re-checked for clarity and comprehensiveness. It was determined the problem did not change in nature and scope.

### **Literature Review**

Literature searches were initiated at the National Emergency Training Center's (NETC) Learning Resource Center (LRC) in October 2001, during the author's attendance at the National Fire Academy. Additional searches were conducted within the public library system of the City of Naperville, Illinois and the library of Illinois Benedictine University located in Lisle, Illinois. The literature review involved the search of fire service, public administration, and

organizational behavior textbooks, magazines, professional journals, and reports. Extensive searches were also conducted online through Internet search engines to identify published documents. The author's private collection of fire service, organizational behavior, and public administration literature was also reviewed.

The literature review impacted the purpose of the research by identifying current trends taking place in the fire service that are influencing outsourcing, and identified advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing.

### **Surveys**

A survey instrument was developed to collect information from surrounding fire departments in the Chicago area (see appendix B). The survey provided a means to collect data relative to outsourcing fire prevention bureau services.

The survey was sent to 18 municipal suburban fire departments in the Chicago area. The fire departments were selected based on their Mutual Aide Box Alarm System (MABAS) division. Only those municipal fire departments in the same MABAS division as the Mount Prospect Fire Department were selected. MABAS divisions are in the same geographical location and operate under similar procedures. The survey requested objective information from each fire department pertaining to outsourcing fire prevention bureau services. The survey instrument focused on what were the circumstances that led to fire departments outsourcing fire prevention bureau services, or why the fire department did not elect to outsource fire prevention bureau services. The survey also identified which fire prevention bureau services fire departments outsourced. Lastly, the survey gathered information pertaining to the advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing fire prevention bureau services.

Coworkers of the author in the Mount Prospect Fire Department first reviewed the survey instrument for clarity, content, and functionality of design. It was not field-tested on sample

groups. The elimination of the sample testing was based upon the objectivity of the survey questions and the desire to survey similar surrounding suburban fire departments in the Chicago area.

The surveys were distributed on January 2, 2002 to the attention of the fire chief via facsimile to all MABAS Division I Fire Departments. The fire departments surveyed were (a) Arlington Heights Fire Department, (b) Buffalo Grove Fire Department, (c) Lake Zurich Fire Department, (d) Palatine Fire Department, (e) Palatine Rural Fire Department, (f) Barrington Fire Department, (g) Bloomingdale Fire Department, (h) Rolling Meadows Fire Department, (i) Prospect Heights Fire Department, (j) Wheeling Fire Department, (k) Elk Grove Fire Department, (l) Hoffman Estates Fire Department, (m) Itasca Fire Department, (n) Roselle Fire Department, (o) Schaumburg Fire Department, (p) Streamwood Fire Department, and (q) Wood Dale Fire Department.

To help facilitate and encourage responses, a cover letter explaining the nature, purpose, and scope of the survey was attached to the survey (see Appendix C).

When a survey answered appeared incomplete or contradictory in nature, the author initiated a follow up telephone conversation. Fire departments that did not respond by February 15, 2002 were considered as “non-respondents.” There were two non-respondents. Elk Grove Village and Roselle Fire Departments did not respond.

### **Interviews**

Telephone interviews were conducted with owners of companies specializing in outsourcing fire prevention services. A telephone interview was conducted with Gary Jensen, owner of American Emergency Services located in Wheaton, Illinois on February 15, 2002. Gary Jensen was selected because his company is responsible for providing contract fire prevention and suppression services to a geographical area once served by Mount Prospect Fire

Department. He has been in business since 1979. The purpose of the interview was to gain insight as to the services provided by his company, identify his view points regarding the changes in the fire service that are influencing outsourcing, and his perception of the advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing. The services of his company were also identified in the literature review conducted by the author.

A telephone interview was conducted with James Schifiliti, owner of Fire Safety Consultants Incorporated on February 21, 2002. Fire Safety Consultants is located in Schaumburg, Illinois. The company has been in business since 1983 and provides fire prevention outsourcing services to 104 municipalities. His services include construction document reviews and inspections.

James was chosen because his company was frequently identified as responsible for outsourcing fire prevention bureau services in the survey instrument conducted by the author. Fire Safety Consultants specializes in outsourcing of fire prevention bureau services. The purpose of the interview was to gain insights as to the type of fire prevention bureau services that are frequently outsourced by fire departments. Additionally the purpose of the interview was to identify the owners view point regarding the changes in the fire service that are influencing outsourcing, and his perception of the advantages and disadvantages of outsourcing.

## **RESULTS**

### **Fire Service Changes Influencing the Use of Contractual Services**

- **Privatization fosters competition in government.**

According to the literature review, a significant problem facing government is a lack of competition. Privatization or outsourcing is a method that is creating competition in

government. The literature review reveals that competition in government can serve as a means to improve performance.

- **The fire service is not untouched by privatization or outsourcing.**

The literature review identifies that in times of budget shortfalls and demands for quality service, fire suppression and fire prevention bureau services are being outsourced throughout the country. The literature review indicates there are private sector companies involved in every aspect of fire prevention and fire suppression.

According to the interview with James Schifiliti, there is an increased demand for his service because of the changes in the codes and ever changing technology in fire protection systems. Today, construction document reviews require a technical person such as a fire protection engineer. Performance based codes and complex hydraulic calculations for sprinkler systems can make construction document reviews difficult for the average fire inspector. Many municipalities are forced to do more with less. Municipalities can use the construction document review and inspection services of Fire Safety Consultants and defer the cost of the service to the construction contractor.

- **Today's complicated code environment is elevating the role of fire prevention to a higher level of professionalism.**

The literature review indicates the continued movement to performance-based codes will increase the trend for specially trained fire prevention bureau personnel. According to the literature review, many municipalities and state agencies lack the expertise to review performance-based designs. The means of fire departments and state agencies to compensate for the lack of a technically competent staff is to outsource the technical tasks.

The results of the survey instrument reveals that the lack of a technically competent person to conduct construction document reviews dictates the need to outsource construction

document reviews. The results of the survey indicate that 60% of the fire departments that outsource fire prevention bureau services do so because they lack a technically competent person.

### **How Similar Suburban Fire Departments Outsource Fire Prevention Bureau Services**

- **Some suburban fire departments in the Chicago area outsource fire prevention bureau services.**

Of the fire departments surveyed (n=16), 62.5% of the fire departments outsource fire prevention bureau services. The remaining 37.5% do not outsource fire prevention bureau services.

**Table 1**  
**Fire Department's Utilization of Outsourcing**

Response to Outsourcing	f	P
Currently outsource fire prevention services	10	62.5
Do not outsource fire prevention bureau services	6	37.5

*NOTE: f=frequency; P = percent; n=16*

The survey reveals the only fire prevention bureau service that is outsourced by the fire departments surveyed is construction document review. The results of the survey indicate that of the fire departments that outsource fire prevention bureau services (n=10), 100% outsource construction document reviews.



**Table 2**  
**Fire Prevention Bureau Services Outsourced**

Fire Prevention Service	f	P
Construction document review	10	100
Fire inspections	0	0
Fire safety education	0	0
Fire investigations	0	0
Other services	0	0

*NOTE: f=frequency; P=percent; n=10*

According to the survey, 60% of the fire departments that outsource fire prevention do so on a regular basis. The remaining 40% of the fire departments only outsource fire prevention bureau services on an as needed basis. According to the survey, workload or complex work requiring technical expertise dictates when the fire prevention bureau service is outsourced. The survey also revealed that the fire departments elect to outsource fire prevention bureau services when there is an increase in workload or they lack the technical expertise within the fire prevention bureau.

The survey identified the criteria in selecting a company or individual to perform the outsourcing activity. The results of the survey indicate fire department experience, formal education in fire protection and recommendations by others were equally important selection criteria.

**Table 3**  
**Importance of Outsourcing Selection Criteria**

Outsourcing Selection Criteria	f	P
Fire department experience	7	29.2
Formal education	7	29.2
Recommendations of others	7	29.2
Cost	3	12.4
Other	0	0

*NOTE: Respondents were asked to check all that apply; f=Frequency; P=percent; n=24*

Even though fire departments do not currently outsource fire prevention services, they have considered it in the past.

The survey revealed that 66% of the fire departments that do not currently outsource fire prevention bureau services have considered it in the past.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Outsourcing Fire Prevention Bureau Services**

- **Outsourcing services can provide a cost savings to the government entity and increase flexibility.**

According the literature review, cost savings is an advantage of outsourcing. The literature review indicates that there are no incentives for government entities to hold costs down. Contracts provide a less expensive way of providing the service.

According to an interview conducted with Gary Jensen, owner of American Emergency Services, the ability of his company to provide fire suppression and prevention services at a reduced costs makes contracting a viable option to government entities. Municipalities are continually forced to do more with less. The continued rising cost of labor drives up the cost of providing fire protection services.

The interview with James Schifiliti, owner of Fire Safety Consultants, indicates that fire departments can outsource with his company for fire prevention services at no cost. According to the interview, the general construction contractors or developers using his service pay for his fire prevention services. The municipality may have the contractors pay directly to him or the municipal permit fees maybe increased to cover the cost of the service.

According to the survey, 100% of the fire departments that outsource the fire prevention bureau service of construction document review indicate cost recovery as an advantage to outsourcing.

The literature review indicates flexibility is increased when a service is outsourced because it can be tailored to meet the needs of the government entity. The survey revealed an advantage of outsourcing fire prevention bureau services is the reduction in fire department's workload. The disadvantages of outsourcing include the lack of control of the service and the potential for collusion.

According to the literature review, because of the nature of the contractual process in government, there is a potential for collusion. The literature review identifies there may be a loss of control of the service by the government entity once the service is outsourced. According to the survey, disadvantages of outsourcing of fire prevention services include lack of control, and sworn or uniformed fire department personnel do not perform the work.

The interview with James Schifiliti indicates there are a number of private companies that will provide the outsourcing service. He stated that some of the companies that provide services to fire departments have no fire service experience and do not always meet the expectation of the municipality. He has had discussions with potential customers seeking his service because of a bad outsourcing experience they had with another private company. According to the interview, there are private companies who do not have the formal education or experience to be conducting fire protection plan reviews. They may be more cost effective but do not always offer a technically competent person to perform the service. This can result in delayed construction document review time and poor performance. Mr. Schifiliti also indicated that a municipality could lose control of the outsourced service if they do not devote a person to serve as the liaison between the municipality and the outsourcing company. Mr. Schifiliti uses the weaknesses he sees with the competition and strives to ensure his company does not have similar problems. He feels that this is why his company is so successful.

## DISCUSSION

Clark (1998) indicates privatization is a means for government to meet the demands of the public during tough economic times. Clark found that government entities need to be productive, efficient and develop a competitive edge if they want to survive privatization.

Guardino et al. (1993) have the same viewpoint as Clark (1998) when they identify competitive contracting as an effective budget tool during budget short falls. Competitive contracting allows the service to be provided at a reduced cost. These findings are also consistent with the interviews and surveys conducted.

The survey revealed cost reduction was a driving force behind outsourcing fire prevention bureau services. According to the interviews with owners of companies specializing in outsourcing fire prevention services, cost is a reason that municipalities contact their organizations. Guardino et al. (1993) indicates that outsourcing can reduce costs, although while interviewing James Shiffilliti, he indicates there can be no cost to the municipality. The cost of the outsourcing construction document reviews can actually be deferred to the general construction contractor. The municipality can require the contractor to pay for the construction document review service through the adoption of a local ordinance.

The author agrees that cost is a driving force for outsourcing municipal services. It is the author's opinion that the trend of reduced budgets and doing more with less will continue to play a role in the fire service. It has been the author's experience, that the reason outsourcing has occurred in the municipality where the research problem originates is cost. The history of a private organization providing fire suppression and prevention services to a geographical area once served by the Mount Prospect Fire department evolved partly because of costs. The current practice of the Village of Mount Prospect outsourcing building department services is driven by cost and the need for specially trained personnel.

The implication of the research findings to the Mount Prospect Fire Department is the cost of the fire prevention bureau services must equal or exceed the expectations of the citizens and elected officials. The author agrees with the finding of Clark (1998) that indicates that creating a competitive edge will help municipalities survive privatization.

McGillicuddy (1996) refers to privatization as competition in government and indicates it is the competition that is contributing to privatization. According to Koehler and Pankowski (1996) a problem that is facing government today is the lack of competition. The author concurs with the findings of McGillicuddy, Koehler and Pankowski. As indicated above, the fact that privatization can occur influences the municipality to ensure quality and cost effectiveness.

A trend influencing privatization or outsourcing in the fire prevention arena is the increased need for personnel with specialized skills. Klinoff (1997) indicates that one of the most important and least recognized jobs the fire department performs is fire prevention. Klinoff also identified that the duties of fire prevention have evolved to a higher professional level.

The level of expertise required in today's fire prevention bureaus was evident by the work of Puchovsky (1997), Mirkhah (1997), and Wood (2000). All three identified that performance-based codes are becoming more and more prevalent in fire prevention. The enforcement and review of performance-based designs requires extensive levels of engineering education and experience.

Mirkhah (1997) found that many authorities having jurisdiction fall short of the education needed for performance-based designs. Wood (2000) also concluded that many authorities having jurisdiction are not prepared for performance-based codes. In fact, Wood found that the fire service's employment of personnel trained in performance-based designs is severely deficient.

The findings of Mirkhah (1997), Puchovsky (1997) and Wood (2000) play a significant role in the research. These findings clearly identify a trend of an increase in the technical requirements for fire prevention. It also shows that many of the fire departments are not prepared for such technical demands. The lack of technical expertise in fire prevention bureaus was also evident in the survey and interviews.

According to the survey conducted, a leading reason for outsourcing fire prevention services is the lack of technical expertise within the fire prevention bureau. According to the interview with James Shiffilliti, who specializes in construction document review, outsourcing is used frequently by fire departments because they lack the technical abilities to conduct construction document reviews. Performance-based designs and the complexity of sprinkler system calculations are forcing fire departments to look outside their department for performing construction document reviews. One of the recommendations in the findings of Wood (2000) is the Office of the Illinois State Fire Marshal should outsource review of performance-based designs.

The surveys only indicated outsourcing of construction document reviews. The results of the survey contradict the interview with James Schifiliti and the literature review. It is the author's opinion that fire departments that now outsource construction document review may consider outsourcing other services. As the complexity of fire prevention increases, there will be a greater demand for technically competent personnel for uses other than just construction document reviews. Outsourcing may be a way to achieve this at a reduced cost. Fire departments in the future may outsource all of their fire prevention bureau services to an independent company.

The researcher agrees there is an increase in the complexity of fire prevention that only will continue. This impacts the Mount Prospect Fire Department by identifying the need to

maintain a staff with technical competencies. Many of the required skills needed in fire prevention can be found in a fire protection engineer. The researcher agrees outsourcing is a means to address the complexity found in today's fire prevention bureau. However, not all companies providing an outsource service have technical abilities needed. Granted, these companies may perform the service but the quality of their work may not be much different than those performed by existing fire department personnel.

The ability to utilize a company or an individual with specific training is an advantage of outsourcing. According to the survey instrument, other advantages of outsourcing include a reduction in cost and reduction in workloads. The work of O'Leary (1997) also identifies cost as an advantage but also adds the flexibility to provide a tailored program to meet the needs of the fire department.

The disadvantages of outsourcing identified by O'Leary (1997) include the need for monitoring the outsourcing service, potential for collusion and inappropriate providers. According to the interview with James Schifiliti, there are private companies that do not meet the expectations of the municipality. Municipalities that are outsourcing a service with another company and are dissatisfied frequently contact him. The results of the survey indicate loss of control and having the work performed by non-sworn fire department personnel as a disadvantage of outsourcing.

The researcher agrees there are advantages to outsourcing. The biggest advantage of outsourcing seen by the researcher is the reduction in cost or the potential to make the outsourced service cost recoverable. The researcher agrees disadvantages include the loss of control and the potential not to have the outsourcing company perform as expected. The Village of Mount Prospect has begun to outsource construction document reviews in the building division. The

researcher believes that during this time, there has been a loss of involvement in the construction document review process and a lack of quality.

The discovery of the advantages and disadvantages affects the future of the Mount Prospect Fire Department. The fire department can now overcome the pitfalls of outsourcing if it elects to outsource a service. The advantages of outsourcing can be used to identify the qualities of an outsourcing contractor.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based upon this research, the following recommendations are made.

1. Do not use outsourcing as a means to replace the full time fire protection engineer position or other fire prevention positions. Continue to utilize at least one full time fire protection engineer to conduct construction document reviews. The full time fire protection engineer will help ensure the quality of the construction document review while providing the level of technical expertise needed in today's complex fire prevention bureau. A full time person for construction document review will provide control over the time it takes to conduct the plan review service.

2. Outsource construction document reviews and inspections during peak workloads. Outsourcing does have the ability to reduce the amount of workload. In times of tight budgets, it is difficult to procure additional positions. Some of the peaks in workloads may be contributed to the economy or a particular construction project within the municipality. It would be advantageous to accommodate the increased work demands during these periods by outsourcing the inspection and construction document review service. This would also provide the Mount Prospect Fire Department with the option to discontinue the outsourced service as the work demand decreased.



3. Develop a Request for Proposal (RFP) to select a company that will provide outsourcing services specializing in construction document reviews. These criteria will be used to select an outsourcing service during peak work times. The criteria need to include fire service experience, formal education in fire prevention and recommendations of other municipalities using their service.

4. During peak work demands, develop a means to defer the cost of outsourcing to the contractor by adopting a local ordinance that will allow the cost of outsourcing of construction document reviews to be paid by the general construction contractor. One of the advantages of outsourcing is the ability to reduce costs. Peak workloads can occur during tight budgets. Even though work demands may increase, there may not be funding available to pay for the outsourcing service. A method to compensate for budget restraints is to pass a municipal ordinance that will allow the contractor to pay for the outsourcing of the construction documents and inspections. If contractors elect to take advantage of this service, they will have a quicker construction document review time and flexibility to have an inspection as soon as possible.

5. Assign an existing fire prevention bureau staff member the responsibility of managing the outsourcing service and serve as a liaison between the outsourcing company and the Mount Prospect Fire Department. A disadvantage that can occur during outsourcing is the loss of control of the service by the municipality. Assigning an individual responsible for managing the outsourcing, and serving, as a liaison between the municipality, contractor, and outsourcing service will help maintain control of the fire prevention bureau service. The ability to interact with all parties involved will also help monitor the quality of the service being provided and enable the fire prevention bureau to make changes with the process as needed.

6. Conduct further research by surveying additional fire departments that outsource other fire prevention bureau services besides construction document reviews. Use the

information gathered to revise the Request for Proposal recommendation noted above. This will enable the Mount Prospect Fire Department to have the ability to outsource a variety of fire prevention services during peak work demands. This will also create an environment where the fire department is being fiscally responsible and competitive.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Telephone Interview Questionnaire**

1. What is your position in the company?
2. Please explain the services provided by your company?
3. How long have you been in business?
4. What is your current client base?
5. Do you foresee an increase or decrease in the demand for your services?
6. What trends in the fire service are influencing the demand or lack of demand for your service?
7. Why do municipalities choose your service?
8. Why do municipalities elect not to use your service?
9. What are the advantages of your service to the municipality?
10. What are the disadvantages of your service to the municipality?

## APPENDIX B

### **Fire Prevention Survey**

Please check the appropriate box or fill in the blank for each of the following questions.

1. Please indicate the name of the fire department completing the survey.
2. What is the population served by your fire department?
3. How many employees work for the fire department?
4. How many employees work in the fire prevention bureau?
5. What are the primary responsibilities of the fire prevention bureau?

Please check all that apply.

- ☐ Construction document review
  - ☐ Code enforcement (inspections)
  - ☐ Fire Safety Education
  - ☐ Fire/arson investigation
  - ☐ Supervision/management of the fire prevention bureau
  - ☐ Other, please describe
6. Do you currently outsource fire prevention bureau services either on a regular or as needed basis? (Outsourcing is the use of contract employees, consultants, etc. or companies to perform duties normally performed by the fire prevention bureau)
- ☐ Yes  
**If you checked yes, go to question (7) seven.**
  - ☐ No  
**If you checked no, go to question number (8) eight.**

7. A) When do you outsource fire prevention services?

- ☐ Regularly
- ☐ Infrequently

B) Explain what dictates when you use the outsourcing service?

C) Briefly, describe the initial reason for outsourcing fire prevention bureau services.

D) What are the criteria in choosing a company or individual to perform outsourcing activities?

Please check all that apply.

- ☐ Fire Department experience
- ☐ Formal education in fire protection
- ☐ Recommendations
- ☐ Cost of outsourcing
- ☐ Other (Please specify)

E) Identify which fire prevention bureau services your fire department currently outsources and the company or individual performing the outsourcing?

- ☐ Construction document review  
Performed by \_\_\_\_\_  
(Company or individual)
- ☐ Fire inspection  
Performed by \_\_\_\_\_  
(Company or individual)
- ☐ Fire safety education  
Performed by \_\_\_\_\_  
(Company or individual)
- ☐ Fire investigations  
Performed by \_\_\_\_\_  
(Company or individual)
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_  
Performed by \_\_\_\_\_  
(Company or individual)

F) Are there any fire prevention bureau services that you are considering to outsource in the future?

- G) What obstacles do you foresee in outsourcing this service?
- H) Do you feel there are competent individuals or companies capable of performing this service? If no what competencies do they lack?
- I) What advantages have you experienced in outsourcing fire prevention bureau activities?
- J) What disadvantages have you experienced in outsourcing fire prevention bureau activities?
- K) What is the fire department's annual cost to outsource fire prevention bureau services?
- L) How much is budgeted annually for outsourcing fire prevention bureau services?
8. A) Have you ever considered outsourcing fire prevention bureau services?
- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes (Please answer items 1 and 2 below.)
1. Identify which fire prevention bureau services you have considered outsourcing?
  2. Why did you choose to not outsource the services?
- B) What is the main reason you have not considered outsourcing fire prevention bureau services?
- C) What disadvantages do you foresee with outsourcing fire prevention bureau services?
- D) What advantages do you foresee with outsourcing fire prevention bureau services?
- E) Is there any existing or future circumstances that would make your fire department consider outsourcing fire prevention bureau services?

Individual completing the survey

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Telephone number\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you. Please fax this survey by January 18, 2002 to  
Paul Valentine, Fire Marshal.

Mount Prospect Fire Department, **FAX NUMBER 847-818-5240**



**APPENDIX C****Survey Cover Letter**

January 2, 2002

Fire Department  
Chief  
Address  
City, State, zip

Dear Chief:

I am currently participating in the National Fire Academy's Executive Fire Officer Program.

The program requires the completion of a comprehensive research project. For my project, I have chosen to examine outsourcing fire prevention bureau services. This includes fire prevention bureau services ranging from plan review to inspections.

In order to complete a portion of my research, I have developed the attached fire prevention survey. I would appreciate it if you would please take a few minutes to complete the survey and fax it to me by January 18, 2002. The fax number is (847) 818-5240.

I will be happy to share the results of my research with anyone who is interested. Thank you for your time and assistance. If you have any questions, I can be contacted at (847) 818-5255.

Sincerely,

R. Paul Valentine  
Fire Marshal